

# The historical development of French *wh in situ*

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« *Ton père va où?* » [...] *c'est encore le rythme [...] qui joue un rôle plus important que la logique.* »  
de Boer (1926, p. 323)

**General goal:** This paper militates for the view that syntactic variation and syntactic linguistic change are external to (narrow) syntax. **Main claims:** 1) the *wh in situ* variant of partial questions (Qs) in Modern French (MF) is directly linked to the prosodic changes that Old French (OF) went through in the 12th c.; 2) Q formation is universal (CP present in all languages and so is WH scope) but variation in Q formation is not part of narrow syntax. It is conditioned instead by prosodic factors; 3) In diachronic terms, a *wh mvt* language becomes a *wh in situ* language if it loses its *mobile* stress patterns. Conversely, a language with *wh in situ* becomes a language with *wh mvt* if the language develops *mobile* stress patterns. **Prosody and V2:** As is well-known, the loss of V2 in French has been linked to the prosodic change that the French declarative sentence underwent in the 12th c. (1) (Adams 1987). OF sentences had an initial accent and word stress comparable to Germanic languages (2)-(3). In Germanic word stress falls on initial rather than final syllables, but word stress is also mobile (4). In French word stress has for many centuries been on the final syllable: it is non-distinctive and predictable (4). Phrasal stress is also fixed in French (last position) contrary to Germanic (5). As a way of illustration, compare the meter system of English vs. French (6a-b). The prosodic change is confirmed by Noyer's (2002) very interesting study where it is shown the OF octosyllable c. 975 to 1180 had an underlying iambic pattern. While he admits no text at any period conforms absolutely to the Iambic Pattern in the sense of classical English verse (Shakespeare, Milton, or even Shelley), in the earliest works, departure from this is fairly limited. (7) is a good and clear example from a text prior to 1160 where the four lines are in fact perfectly iambic. The change in prosody had catastrophic consequences for the grammar of French. V2 started to crumble (Adams 1988, Clark et Roberts 1993+many others) and at the end of the 12th century left dislocation (8) started to emerge (see Kroch 2001). **Prosody and questions:** de Boer (1926) argues that the development of Qs in French is tied to the change in prosody from OF to MidF (9). Yes-no Qs with *est-ce que* started to develop (in the 16<sup>th</sup> c. according to Foulet 1921, Marchello-Nizia 1997, Buridant 2000) to compensate for the lack of initial stress: *part votre père?* disappeared because the verb could no longer be stressed. Qs such as *pourquoi est-ce que*, *qui est-ce que*, etc. lost their emphatic connotation: *est-ce que* was used in lieu of stress. I would like to propose that the appearance of *wh in situ* in French is directly linked to the earlier change of accent. This idea follows de Boer's (1926) insight. Although he does not discuss *wh in situ* very much, he nevertheless mentions this gem sentence in passing: [...] « *Ton père va où?* » [...] *c'est encore le rythme [...] qui joue un rôle plus important que la logique.* » p. 323. French focused elements (including *wh*) appear in final positions, the only stressed positions (10). Whereas it is often claimed in the literature that *wh in situ* in French is a recent development (Thévenot 1976 : 164), I argue that the construction is old, that it must have developed when the stress change cycle was complete. *Wh in situ* is rare in French texts, presumably because it has always been considered non-standard (even today). It is even absent from 19<sup>th</sup> century novels with dialogues from the working class, cf. Hugo and Zola). However, one example is attested as early as 1784 ((11) from Diderot's *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*) and many examples start to surface at the beg. of the 20<sup>th</sup> c.(12)-(13). I will also argue that the development of split questions such as (14)-(15) is a direct consequence of the prosodic change. These are also considered colloquial and new but it turns out that they are very old. They start surfacing at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> c./beg. of 16<sup>th</sup>. In these constructions, although the *wh* part remains in the initial position, a portion of the *wh* phrase appears *in situ*. No such constructions are found before the 14<sup>th</sup> c. These are measurable because there are numerous examples: their evolution is easy to track. **External parameters and language change:** I propose the following generalization: i) Languages with mobile stress have *wh movement*; ii) Languages with non-mobile stress have *wh in situ* (tone languages are often *wh in situ* languages precisely because they have no stress). Languages can go from i) to ii) or vice versa. On my view, it is not a coincidence that languages like Turkish and French have *wh in situ*: stress is always on the last syllable/always predictable in both languages. In that group are: Armenian<sup>1</sup> and Persian.<sup>2</sup> The present account makes better predictions than its competitors: *wh in situ* languages are not necessarily tied to the availability of Q particles (Cheng 1991). Bruening (2007:141) notes that across a typology of over 500 languages taken from Dryer (2004), there is no relationship between a question particle and *wh in situ*, let alone *wh* particles. My account is also an improvement on Richards's (2010) recent prosodic account of *wh in situ* where variation in Q patterns depends on prosody<sup>3</sup> but for him *wh* variation depends on the position of the complementizer (left or right) and whether prosodic domains are aligned to the left or the right of the phrase (left-headed languages tend to have right end prosodic settings, and right-headed languages tend to have left end prosodic settings). Although supposedly a pure prosodic account, it relies too much on word order. It is not clear how Turkish or such languages can be explained under such a view. For me, *wh in situ* is tied to accent rather than word order. *Wh* variation is conditioned not by narrow syntax but by prosody. This case might be taken to show that syntactic variation and syntactic language change are outside narrow syntax. UG is invariant in line with recent reasoning (Chomsky 2005, Newmeyer 2005, Boeckx 2010). Since the *wh* parameter is not traditional, but might reduce to emergent properties of the language, it may not be categorical but only a tendency. Time permitting I will address the question as to why optionality is tolerated: most languages that have *wh in situ* have also *wh movement*.

